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SUBJECT: CHIEF ARCHEOLOGIST DESCRIBES MUGHRABI GATE EXCAVATION

REF: A. TEL AVIV 441
1B. JERUSALEM 252
1C. AMMAN 585

11. (U) SUMMARY: CHIEF JERUSALEM ARCHEOLOGIST FOR THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY, BARUCH YUVAL, TOLD POLOFFS FEBRUARY 8 THAT THE NEW EXCAVATIONS OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF COMPLEX IN JERUSALEM'S OLD CITY (REFTELS) HAD BEEN PLANNED OPENLY AND IN CONSULTATION WITH ALL INTERESTED PARTIES. THE EXCAVATION WAS INTENDED TO SALVAGE ANY SIGNIFICANT ANTIQUITIES THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE BE DAMAGED BY CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW ACCESS RAMP FOR THE MUGHRABI GATE. THE SALVAGE WORK SHOULD LAST 8-12 MONTHS, HE SAID, AND WOULD NOT APPROACH CLOSER THAN ABOUT TEN METERS FROM THE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF WALLS. THE NEW RAMP WILL BE SUPPORTED BY SEVEN PILLARS AND WILL DESCEND FROM THE MUGHRABI GATE TO A POINT NEAR THE DUNG GATE ENTRANCE TO THE JEWISH QUARTER IN THE OLD CITY. AS IT DESCENDS FROM THE MUGHRABI GATE, IT WILL FOLLOW THE PATH OF THE OLD STONE RAMP (DEEMED UNSAFE IN 2004), BUT EXTEND BEYOND THE POINT AT WHICH THE OLD RAMP ENDED IN ORDER TO REACH A SPOT CLOSER TO THE DUNG GATE. THE HEAVY EQUIPMENT OBSERVED AT THE SITE WAS ONLY TO REMOVE THE TOP LAYER OF ARCHITECTURALLY INSIGNIFICANT CONCRETE AND SOIL, HE SAID, AND THERE WAS NO RISK TO THE STABILITY OF THE HARAM AL-SHARIF/TEMPLE MOUNT. END SUMMARY.

THE PLAN: LONG RAMP, LIGHT FOOTPRINT

12. (U) IN RESPONSE TO PM ADVISOR SHALOM TOURGEMAN'S INVITATION TO THE AMBASSADOR (REF. A), THE EMBASSY ALSO INVITED CONGEN JERUSALEM POLOFF TO A MEETING FEBRUARY 8 WITH BARUCH YUVAL, CHIEF JERUSALEM-AREA ARCHEOLOGIST FOR THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY (IAA), TO GET A BRIEFING ON THE IAA'S EXCAVATION WORK OUTSIDE THE MUGHRABI GATE ENTRANCE TO THE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF (REFTELS). YUVAL SHOWED POLOFFS AN ARCHITECTURAL PLAN (FORWARDED TO NEA/IPA) FOR THE NEW MUGHRABI GATE ACCESS RAMP BEING CONSTRUCTED TO REPLACE A TEMPORARY WOODEN RAMP THAT WAS INSTALLED AFTER THE ORIGINAL EARTH AND STONE RAMP (CONSTRUCTED BY ISRAEL AFTER THE 1967 WAR) COLLAPSED IN 2004. THE NEW PEDESTRIAN RAMP WILL DESCEND FROM THE MUGHRABI GATE TO A POINT NEAR THE DUNG GATE ENTRANCE TO THE JEWISH QUARTER IN THE OLD CITY, A DISTANCE OF SOME 130-140 METERS, ACCORDING TO YUVAL. AS IT DESCENDS FROM THE MUGHRABI GATE, IT WILL FOLLOW THE PATH OF THE OLD STONE RAMP, BUT EXTEND BEYOND THE POINT AT WHICH THE OLD RAMP ENDED IN ORDER TO REACH A SPOT CLOSER TO THE DUNG GATE. SEVEN PILLARS ANCHORED IN BEDROCK WILL SUPPORT THE RAMP. YUVAL SAID THE IAA VETOED THE FIRST TWO PLANS PROVIDED BY THE PROJECT ARCHITECT BECAUSE, WHILE SHORTER, THE EARLIER PLANNED RAMPS WOULD HAVE RISKED UNNECESSARY DAMAGE TO ARTIFACTS IN THE ARCHEOLOGICAL PARK ADJACENT TO THE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF. YUVAL ALSO NOTED THAT NEW LAWS TO DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF THE DISABLED REQUIRED A MORE GRADUAL SLOPE (FOR

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS), AND THUS A LONGER RAMP.

THE EXCAVATIONS

¶3. (U) UNDER ISRAELI LAW, ANY CONSTRUCTION IN THE OLD CITY MUST BE PRECEDED BY AN ARCHEOLOGICAL SALVAGE OPERATION CONDUCTED BY THE IAA. YUVAL SAID THAT WHILE THE IAA OPERATION AT THE SITE OF THE OLD RAMP JUST STARTED THIS WEEK, SALVAGE EXCAVATIONS UNDER THE AREA OF THE PLANNED RAMP NEAR THE DUNG GATE HAVE BEEN UNDERWAY FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS. HE NOTED THAT THE IAA WAS ONLY PLANNING TO EXCAVATE IN THE AREAS WHERE THE SEVEN SUPPORT PILLARS ARE TO BE ANCHORED IN BEDROCK. THE EXCAVATION AT THESE POINTS WILL REACH A DEPTH OF 24-25 METERS

AND WILL LAST APPROXIMATELY 8-12 MONTHS, HE SAID. ASKED ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF LARGE EARTH-MOVING EQUIPMENT AT THE SITE, YUVAL SAID THE EQUIPMENT WAS BEING USED ONLY TO REMOVE THE TOP 1/2-2 METERS OF (ARCHEOLOGICALLY INSIGNIFICANT) CONCRETE AND SOIL THAT HAD FORMED THE TOP LAYERS OF THE OLD RAMP. YUVAL ALSO NOTED THAT THE DIGGING WOULD NOT GET CLOSER THAN APPROXIMATELY TEN METERS TO THE WALLS OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF.

¶4. (U) ASKED HOW THE IAA WOULD DETERMINE THE RELATIVE CONSERVATION VALUE OF THE MANY ARTIFACTS THEY ARE LIKELY TO DISCOVER, YUVAL SAID HE WOULD TAKE EACH CASE INDIVIDUALLY. HE SAID THAT THE IAA WOULD NOT PRIVILEGE THE ANTIQUITIES OF ANY RELIGION OVER ANY OTHER. IN EXCAVATING TO BEDROCK AROUND THE SEVEN PLANNED SUPPORT PILLARS, THE ARCHEOLOGISTS WOULD DIG THROUGH SIGNIFICANT MUSLIM, CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH (SECOND TEMPLE) SITES. IN THE END, HE SAID, THE IAA WOULD REMOVE AND PRESERVE WHICHEVER ARTIFACTS IT DEEMED MOST HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT.

COORDINATION

¶5. (U) ASKED ABOUT THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE IAA AND GOI HAD COORDINATED THE WORK WITH THE JERUSALEM WAQF AND THE JORDANIANS, YUVAL SAID THE PROJECT HAD ALREADY BEEN DELAYED BY ONE YEAR IN ORDER TO ALLOW FURTHER CONSULTATION. SAYING THAT HE COULD NOT SPEAK FOR THE GOI OR JERUSALEM MUNICIPALITY, YUVAL SAID THE IAA, FOR ITS PART, HAD STARTED PUBLICLY DISCUSSING THE SALVAGE OPERATION TWO YEARS AGO. HE STRESSED THAT THE PROCESS HAD BEEN OPEN AND THAT THE IAA HAD BEEN WILLING TO DISCUSS THE PROJECT WITH ANY INTERESTED PARTY. WHILE THE WORK WOULD CONTINUE, HE NOTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS CONSIDERING INSTALLING WEB CAMERAS AT THE SITE SO THE WORLD COULD WATCH AND JUDGE THE WORK FOR ITSELF.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: WHILE WE DO NOT DOUBT THAT THE IAA BELIEVES IT MANAGED AN ACTIVE AND OPEN CONSULTATION PROCESS, WE DID NOT HEAR ANYTHING TO SUGGEST THAT THE IAA OR GOI ACTIVELY SOUGHT ARAB OR ISLAMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS. "CONSULTATION" IN THIS CASE MAY HAVE BEEN OPEN BUT NOT PROACTIVE. END COMMENT.

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JONES